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ABSTRACT

The element of static abstractions (SAs)--any pseudoheuristic listing of derived nominals whose purpose is to define good structure in prose writing--is one of the important historical components of the current traditional rhetoric inherited from the nineteenth century. SAs, of which unity, coherence, and emphasis are the best known examples, have been the revered "master terms" of hundreds of composition courses. The educational revolution of the 1930s, however, started in motion forces that undercut SAs by reducing the need for them as content in writing courses. After 1960, only a few textbooks used SAs to organize whole chapters, and none used them to organize whole books. Today SAs are found only in outdated texts. One of the main reasons for the failure of SAs to work well is the very abstractness of the terms, which may create a neat descriptive list, but in fact be so general as to be useless as prescription. Today, teachers realize that the convenient generalities of SAs do not help students compose or edit their own work. Perhaps, this experience with SAs will make teachers beware of neat, comprehensive sounding conceptual schemes that are easy to teach but that have no real contact with what students need to learn. (HOD)

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STATIC ABSTRACTIONS AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

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The continuing revitalization of rhetoric that has made it such an exciting subject in our day has given us many novel pedagogical techniques. But as new teaching methods slowly displace the hoary tenets of current-traditional rhetoric, we have a tendency to cast the older ways aside without examining them carefully. This is, I believe, a mistake. Current-traditional rhetoric has much to tell us about how we have come to be who we are as teachers of writing, and it well repays historical and analytical study. If we are to avoid the pitfalls that caught our disciplinary forebears in ineffective and even harmful teaching methods and philosophies, we must examine what they did and try to determine why they did it. If we can thus determine what sorts of theoretical roads lead to dead ends, we can begin to learn from the miscakes of our progenitors. With this approach in mind I would like to examine one of the important historical components of the current-traditional rhetoric we have inherited from the nineteenth century: the element of "static abstractions."

Static Abstractions: Nature and Early History

First of all, a definition is necessary. What are these "static abstractions" and what have they to do with the teaching of composition?

"Static abstractions" is a term coined by Albert R. Kitzhaber in his seminal Ph.D. dissertation Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900 to refer to the famous triad of "Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis."[1] I have broadened the term to include any pseudo-heuristic listing of derived nominals--abstract adjective-based nouns--whose purpose is to define good structure in

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prose writing. Common examples of such terms are Unity, Variety, Precision, Energy, Clearness, Order, Economy, etc. Such terms are static because they exist in an unchanging theoretical context, presented as paradigmatic and absolute, and are concerned with labeling finished texts. They are abstractions because they exist only as general terms, without qualifiers or specificity. Static abstractions, of which "Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis" are merely the best-known examples, have been an important element in composition teaching for the past one hundred years. They first appeared during the mid-nineteenth century, attained almost absolute acceptance by the end of the century, and have remained an important element in composition teaching down to our own time. They have been the revered "master terms" of hundreds of composition courses; they have been the touchstones against which thousands of students have been instructed to compare their writing. And they evidence, I believe, an essentially flawed conception of how to teach writing, a conception that has broken down almost completely in our day. Let us examine the use of these terms in teaching.

Although the use of lists of static descriptive nouns might seem to be a traditional part of discourse education (indeed, one 1963 text defends Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis as parts of classical rhetorical theory!), important use of static abstractions in the teaching of rhetoric is less than 100 years old. Like so many elements of current-traditional rhetoric, static abstractions can be traced back no farther than the post-Civil War period in America, a time when the novel discipline of "composition" was striving to define itself. In order to understand how the use of static abstractions (which I will hereafter acronymize as SAs) evolved and grew, we must look at the forces that shaped rhetorical education in the nineteenth century, both before and after the "composition revolution" of the period 1880-1900.

From 1790 through the 1850's, discourse education in America took place at colleges that were small, private, and usually religiously-affiliated. Rhetorical training at these schools consisted primarily of training in oratory (often pulpit oratory) and in style, taste, literary appreciation, and the writing of fine sentences. Classical rhetorical theory was important to such courses, but far more important was the work of the great English rhetoricians of the eighteenth century, George Campbell and Hugh Blair. Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric of 1776 and Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-lettres of 1783 were reprinted scores of times in America during the period 1800-1860, and the rhetorical teaching of the time reflected their work--especially the work of Blair--faithfully.

Neither Campbell nor Blair can be said to make real use of SAs as I have defined them. Their concerns were primarily with style and persuasion, and though much of their discussion was informed by Aristotle's "four virtues" of style--clarity, propriety, dignity, and correctness--Campbell and Blair did not structure their treatments of style around these terms, and thus never turned the terms into prescriptive SAs. Campbell indeed spoke often of Purity, Perspicuity, and Vivacity, but never in any mechanical way. Blair mentioned "the properties most essential to a perfect sentence" as "1. Clearness and Precision. 2. Unity. 3. Strength. 4. Harmony."[2] This was as far as Blair's Lectures went in listing adjective-based descriptions, however; neither Blair nor Campbell was interested in lists for their own sake.

Rhetorical education, however, was changing, especially in the United States. With the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, Congress created the land-grant Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges that were to grow into the

major state universities. The era of mass higher education was at hand, and with the increase in the number of college students after 1870 came a need for new sorts of courses. The older type of rhetorical education, with its stress on oratory, stylistic beauties, fine sentences, and analysis of belletristic literature, had served well enough for small private schools turning out doctors, lawyers, teachers, and ministers. Students at the new A & M colleges, however, needed something else. Agriculturists had little use for stylistic analysis; businessmen were uninterested in pulpit oratory; engineers did not much appreciate sentence-by-sentence analysis of the Beauties of Johnson. The once-popular rhetoric of Blair and Campbell began to seem extraneous to the curricula of many students.

These new A & M students, however, had other needs that were to call forth a new sort of rhetorical education. Many of them were from public schools and had seldom been asked to write compositions of any extended length. Many were studying technical or professional fields and needed to be taught all-purpose forms of written communication to meet their career plans. Some students, to the chagrin and shock of older professors, could not write with perfect grammatical correctness--or indeed with any fluency at all. To meet the needs of these students in both the new and the more established colleges (which also felt the effects of the ongoing Industrial Revolution), a new sort of rhetoric course was developed. This course stressed written discourse and ignored oral; it concentrated on mechanical correctness and conventional usage over stylistic beauty and sentence analysis; it demanded short "themes" written to order from its students rather than relying upon examinations; and it was concerned with structure and predictability in writing rather than with the development of an individual stylistic voice or persuasive ability. This new course was, of course, the prototypical freshman English course.

The use of SAs in these early composition courses grew, as Kitzhaber points out, from the earlier Blairian tradition of stylistic rhetoric. Although Blair's use of SA-like terms in his Lectures was not structurally important, American rhetoricians influenced by Blair can be seen developing a "list-consciousness" of the sort that would lead naturally to SAs as early as the 1820's. Samuel Newman in his A Practical System of Rhetoric of 1827 lists the "qualities of a good style" as "Correctness, Perspicuity, Vivacity, Euphony, and Naturalness." In his Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric of 1854, George Quackenbos conflates Campbell on style and Blair on sentences, listing the "essential properties of style" as "Purity, Propriety, Precision, Perspicuity (Clearness), Strength, Harmony, and Unity." Indeed, the alliterative euphony of the first four terms made them very popular during the midcentury period; Purity, Propriety, and Precision, sometimes supplemented by Perspicuity, are often seen linked in the texts of the time.

We must carefully discriminate these lists of stylistic qualities, however, from the phenomenon of static abstractions, which are concerned more with the structure of writing than with its style. Stylistic qualities are concerned with word-choice only, while static abstractions are meant to be applied to more complex structures like paragraphs and whole discourses. They are "assembly-words." At the sertence level there may be some overlap between stylistic qualities and static abstractions; for instance, such static abstractions as "coherence," economy," and "order" might be applied to the sentence, but not very usefully. Application at the paragraph and whole-discourse level is the test of SAs; stylistic qualities as "Purity" and "precision" are meaningless above the sentence level. Stylistic

qualities were usually expressed as adjectives by the end of the nineteenth century, while static abstractions are by nature always nouns. Lists of stylistic qualities such as those of Newman and Quackenbos never really died out of composition texts, but after 1880 or so they were vastly less important in providing overall organization for textbooks. SAs, it can be argued, evolved from the practice of piling up descriptive stylistic adjectives, but they persisted long after stylistic rhetoric had died out.

There is no doubt about who introduced the first true SAs into American composition. Henry N. Day wrote 14 books on rhetoric and composition between 1844 and his death in 1890, and it is to his books Rhetorical Praxis (1861), Art of English Composition (1861) and Art of Discourse (1867) that we must look for the first popular use of SAs. Day's rhetoric provides a bridge between the earlier and later forms of the American composition course; it does contain a heavy dose of stylistic material, but in its love for lists, rules, and Laws it presages the schematic structural rhetoric of the eighties and nineties. In addition to the first listing of the "methods of exposition," which were to become so important in the CTR of the twentieth century, Day's texts present his prototypical SAs, which he called "Laws of Discourse." Day posited four Laws that operated throughout all explanatory writing: "the Law of Unity, the Law of Selection, the Law of Method, and the Law of Completeness." Students were expected to observe each "Law" in the writing they did. Without going deeply into the details of each Law, we can note their presentation. They are clearly not stylistic descriptions like the "Four P's." They are primarily prescriptive, not descriptive; they are apodictic, not inductive. What we have in Day's Laws is a genuinely new sensibility, an approach to teaching composition that marks a radical departure from

descriptive belletristic-stylistic rhetoric: Day is the first important rhetorician attempting to make composition "rational" and "scientific" through the introduction of strict definitions and comprehensive rules (or Laws).

He was, of course, not the last. This was a time when the names of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer were in the air, and the possibility of a truly scientific rhetoric based upon discoverable laws of discourse seemed real in the burgeoning scientific atmosphere of the day. Early psychological explanations of the "laws" governing mental operations sounded impressive; surely, theorized midcentury rhetorical writers, these laws of mind were connected to discoverable laws of discourse. A number of early treatises posited the existence of these laws and some actually listed versions of them; undoubtedly the most complete, serious and arcane of these was David J. Hill's Science of Rhetoric in 1877, which assumed that composition was as much a science as botany or chemistry.

The Growth of Reductionism

In conflict with the growing scientism of some theorists of rhetoric during the post-Civil War period was the attitude of many teachers who were becoming painfully aware of the ineffectiveness of any theoretical approach to teaching students to write. It had been, In fact, the essentially theoretical nature of Blairian stylistic rhetoric that had made it useless in the new "theme-writing" courses. Erastus O. Haven expressed the attitudes of many of the new practitioners in the Preface to his 1869

Rhetoric: A Text-Book:

> Abstruse arguments about style and oratory, about the conflicting therories of taste and beauty, about conviction and persuasion and the laws of mind, and the philosophy of language, are all good and valuable in their place; but a student may read and repeat them with but little more effect on his own habits of speaking or power to write well, than he would receive from an equal amount of study in mathematics, medicine, or law, or any other subject.[3]

Instructors in the classroom wanted a teaching rhetoric, one that would make their intercourse with their charges easier and more effective. They needed teachable and seemingly practical course-content. The Laws of Day and Processes of Hill were a step in the right direction, but too much of their concern remained stylistic and theoretical.

Alexander Bain, who is the single largest contributor to current-traditional rhetoric as it was established in this century, was only an indirect contributor to the establishment of SAs in composition. His English Composition and Rhetoric of 1866, though it contained some stylistic terms, did not enunciate any SA-like terms. It did, however, establish a further expansion of the "list-sensibility" that would provide such a fertile soil for others' static abstractions. Especially influential, of course, were Bain's listing of the four "forms of discourse" and his list of the six rules governing construction of paragraphs. [4]These rules, transmogrified, were to be the basis of the most popular SAs ever developed--the fabled trinity of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis.

The leap from Bain's six paragraph rules to Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis (or UCE, to introduce another acronym) would not take place for twenty years, however, and during that period a demand for simplicity in theory came to the fore. After Day's Laws there were, however, no SA-like

terms that gained general popularity for some years. Adams Sherman Hill presented the terms "Clearness, Force and Elegance" in his popular Principles of Rhetoric in 1878, but these terms, though they achieved a good deal of currency, were essentially stylistic; although they were presented prescriptively, Hill's terms were concerned with word-choice rather than with structure. The great leap from the six "rules" of Bain to full-fledged SAs did not take place until 1886, when John Genung of Amherst College published his extremely influential Practical Elements of Rhetoric.

Genung's text proposed three "fundamental qualities" of the paragraph, qualities that were obviously drawn from Bain's rules but which supplied a simpler heuristic form. Bain's rules were as follows: 1. Explicit Reference 2. Parallel Construction 3. Topic Sentence 4. Consecutive Arrangement 5. Overall Unity 6. Subordination. Genung's simplification of these rules boiled them down to three static abstractions: a paragraph, said Genung, must be distinguished by Unity, by Continuity, and by Proportion. These three terms structured and illuminated the entire paragraph chapter in Practical Elements. Likewise the sentence, in Gunung's view, had two general qualities: Unity and Emphasis. Large sections of the text were devoted to these qualities, and this approach proved very popular; Genung's book became the best-selling composition text of the late eighties.

Throughout this period the struggle to define "composition" that had been going on since the early sixties intensified. The remnents of the Blairian stylistic tradition were hardening and atrophying; what had once been a wide-ranging discussion of stylistic effects had by the late 1880's become a series of prescriptive demands for the "Four P's"-- Purity, Propriety, Precision, and Perspicuity.[5] It began to seem that textbooks

would be successful to the degree that they could reduce rhetorical theory to lists of prescriptive concepts, and thus SAs and the "Four P's" proliferated. A teaching rhetoric was under construction, and by 1890 the stage was set for a truly radical simplification of the theory of composition.

In 1891 it arrived. Barrett Wendell, an "English A" instructor at Harvard, published in that year English Composition, a textbook based on eight lectures he had given at the Lowell Institute in 1890. English Composition was immediately popular despite the fact that it broke the usual textbook mold, containing no exercises or supporting examples from literature. It was popular because it brilliantly reduced all the complex principles of the chaotic postwar rhetorical tradition to a few easily remembered and universally applicable terms. Wendell himself states his case best as he explains the problems he found in the composition texts of his time:

> These books consist chiefly of directions as to how one who would write should set about composing. Many of these suggestions are extremely sensible, many very suggestive. But in every case these directions are appallingly numerous. It took me some years to discern that all which have so far come to my notice could be grouped under one of three very simple heads, each of which might be phrased as a simple proposition. Various as they are, all these directions concern either what may be included in a given composition (a sentence, a paragraph, or a whole); or what I may call the outline, or perhaps better, the mass of the composition--in other words, where the chief parts may most conveniently be placed; or finally, the internal arrangement of the composition in detail. In brief, I may phrase these three principles of composition as follows: (1) Every composition should group itself about one central idea; (2) The chief parts of every composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye; (3) Finally, the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. The first of these principles may conveniently be named the principle of Unity; the second, the principle of Mass; the third, the principle of Coherence.[6]

Here, in a fine example of Wendell's assured, convincing style, we have the prototype of the master-SAs of modern CTR.

Wendell went on in his gracefully-written and extremely influential book to apply his principles of Unity, Mass, and Coherence to the three "levels" of discourse into which textbooks increasingly segmented writing after 1880: the sentence, the paragraph, and the whole theme. Greatly weakened by Wendell's time was the decaying tradition of stylistic rhetoric that had made even Hill and Genung open their books with a "diction" section; Wendell plunged immediately into a discussion of the discourse levels of written composition.

It is not hard in retrospect to see what Wendell accomplished; his ideas were hardly new, and the stunning popularity of his text (the only composition text of the nineties which is still available today in two different editions) must have surprised even him. He had achieved this amazing success by taking Genung's three-term application of Bain's six paragraph rules, changing two of the terms slightly--"Continuity" became "Coherence" and "Proportion" became "Mass"--and proposing to apply the resulting heuristic to all levels of writing. In an educational milieu seeking ever simpler, ever more teachable concepts, it was a reduction that could not have come at a more propitious time. English Composition established the use of SAs as a central tenet of all the texts that followed its lead--and 90% of all texts did.

Derivation and Stagnation

The years between 1891 and 1910 saw some struggles of nomenclature, but in general Wendell's concepts swept the field, encountering only one important challenge. Wendell's term "Mass" was early seen as problematical;

it was rather too vague even for a static abstraction, and in 1893 George Rice Carpenter suggested in his otherwise unexceptional Exercises in Rhetoric and English Composition that the trinity be changed to Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis. This formulation proved acceptable, and from that point on UCE were the main SAs in pedagogy.

There were several half-hearted attempts during the nineties to add to the canon of Wendell's terms or to change them further. Fred N. Scott and Joseph Denney's Paragraph-Writing of 1893 proposed the "general laws of the paragraph" as Unity, Selection, Proportion, Sequence, and Variety, but despite their book's importance in popularizing the Bainian organic paragraph, their "general laws" fell flat. In their Composition-Rhetoric of 1897, Scott and Denney gave in and used UCE as part of their exercises. Alphonso Newcomer introduced Sequence, Clearness, and Effectiveness on top of UCE, and his book sank without a trace. Wendell's terms as modified by Carpenter were showing themselves hard to compete against.

Not all textbooks went along with this gathering flood of SAs, however; older and more established text authors found Wendell's pill particularly bitter to swallow. John Genung resolutely kept his structural discussion concrete in his Texts of 1893 and 1900, neither of which was as popular as The Practical Elements had been. A.S. Hill stuck with his stylistically--based "qualities of expression" (Clearness, Force, and Elegance, which Wendell had, in fact, utilized in the stylistic section of English Composition) in all his later books. But these were the voices of the past; the newer derivative textbooks of the late nineties and the early twentieth century latched onto UCE as they had onto the modes of discourse, the organic paragraph, sentence grammar, and the other ritual treatments of an increasingly standardized teaching rhetoric.

Not all texts of this period, I must hasten to say, used UCE on all three levels. The terms were nearly always used to organize large sections of textbooks, and were most common at the paragraph level (from whence, of course, they had been drawn) or at the level of the whole discourse; UCE, being true static abstractions, were never very effective at the sentence level, and other terms were often tried in discussions of the sentence. (Failure to note the difference between SAs and stylistic terms has been a continuing confusion in current-traditional rhetoric.). Alternative SA formulations never really died out even in the heyday of UCE: there was Albert Granberry Reed's formula of Unity, Coherence, Effectiveness, Variety and Progression; Hammond Lamont proposed Unity, Order, Proportion, Clearness, and Interest; Edwin C. Woolley, in his Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules of 1907 (which may well be the first dogmatic handbook), proffered Unity, Organization, and Coherence. C.S. Baldwin, perhaps the most influential text-author of the first fifth of the new century, had championed UCE in his 1902 College Manual of Rhetoric, but in 1909 he turned from the true faith and demoted UCE to secondary status behind his new master SAs, Clearness and Interest, in Composition: Oral and Written. Throughout this period, however, Wendell's terms remained the clear favorites for most textbook writers.

Beginning around 1910, UCE had achieved such a clear victory that few new SAs appeared to challenge them. An avalanche of textbooks using the terms appeared: Canby's English Composition in Theory and Practice, Maxcy's Rhetorical Principles of Narration, Hanson's Two-Years' Course, Slater's Freshman Rhetoric--the list goes on and on. Rival classifications never really died out completely, and there were always those authors who could not bear conformity and so changed "Emphasis" to "Proportion" or made other

changes equally substantive, but after 1910 the concept of SAs meant for many years the Holy Trinity of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis.

If the teens established UCE as the master-SAs of the century, the decade of the 1920's was the great flowering of SA-consciousness[7]. It saw the most sterile and mechanical use of the terms--for instance, Charles Harvey Raymond's Essentials of English Composition of 1923, which reduced writing to 90 rigid rules, all based on UCE--as well as their spread to nearly all textbooks. But the twenties also saw some changes that would eventually weaken the grip of UCE and then of SAs in general. Several novel sets of SAs appeared, indicating that even in their heyday UCE were not completely satisfactory to teachers. These news sets of terms are not remarkable because they displaced UCE; rather they are notable for their fatuity, the sense they give that the SA paradigm itself was coming to the end of its tether. Widtsoe and Lewis' Effective Writing of 1923, for instance, offered Clearness, Interest, and Effectiveness as its major terms. The Widtsoe and Lewis SAs are all obvious examples of what I call "tautological SAs"--terms that are so general, circular, and self-referential as to be almost completely uninformative. And Rankin, Thorpe, and Solve's College Composition in 1929 created a novel system of SAs that will probably never be bested for sheer mechanism. Their "Qualities of Good Writing" were Interest, Clearness, Organic Unity, Originality, and Sincerity and Restraint. All these terms were exhaustively detailed and were followed up by rigorous exercises--including "Exercises in Sincerity and Restraint"--an activity which illustrates how far divorced from reality SA-based teaching was getting. Again, Rankin, Thorpe, and Solve's terms were largely tautological. SAs had become, in Richard Lanham's words, "a tedious repetitive, unoriginal body of dogma, and one is left with the impression

that text-authors dissatisfied with UCE had few roads to travel that did not lead to inanity.[8]

Gradual Breakdown of Static Abstractions

We cannot point to a date at which it can confidently be said that static abstractions as important elements of composition teaching began to die. Unlike the modes of discourse, which were suffocated by the growth of expository writing, SAs never drowned in their own waste products; they are in fact still extant today in some texts, though their power has been vastly reduced. We can trace a few currents in charting the gradual fade-out of SAs from textbooks, but they continue to hold sway today in the minds of many teachers, and the use of SAs in writing classes will probably not die out completely in this century.

We do know that the 1930's, which was a revolutionary time for education at all levels in America, started in motion forces that would undercut SAs by reducing the need for them as content in writing courses. The influence of John Dewey's educational theories began to be important in the early thirties and became more so as the decade advanced. Texts began to appear that were psychologically more sophisticated, taking a more process-oriented approach to writing, paying more attention to students and their everyday experiences, attempting to link writing with vocational training and the "real world." Many of these Deweyite books did incorporate UCE or other SAs, but the terms were no longer central to the purpose of the texts as they had been in the teens and twenties.

As the thirties advanced, more and more texts were "thesis texts," which put forward as the controlling theme of the whole book a single central idea about how writing should be approached, and these theses seldom

had anything to do with SAs, further reducing their importance in the eyes of the newer practitioners.[9] A whole sub-genre of thesis texts was the "American writing" text--Whitford and Foster's American Standards of Writing, Davidson's American Composition and Rhetoric, Watt's An American Rhetoric, most of which were consciously anti-traditional and many of which avoided UCE in specific or SAs in general.

These trends, important though they were, should not be seen as destroying the power of SAs; UCE in particular kept rolling along in derivative composition texts and by the thirties were usually referred to as the "fundamental laws" of writing. (Like many elements of late nineteenth-century rhetoric, UCE became so widely accepted that their origins were lost by the 1930's and they were generally presumed to be part of the primeval wisdom of the race.) The degree to which the terms had become dogma can be seen amusingly in William C. Hoffman and Roy Davis' Write and Speak Better, a Dale Carnegie-influenced advice-to-businessman treatise from 1937. In a folksy "no intellectuals here" style the authors put forward the usual nostrums for business success through good communication, but then they stop, shuffle for a moment, and admit that. . .uh. . ."a message will be well-put only when it conforms to the old-fashioned requirements of unity, coherence, emphasis, and harmony."

> Now, it may be that you associate these terms with rather depressing experiences. . .you remember unity, coherence, emphasis and harmony from the "dear old school days" when you "took" doses of English composition and speech training. . .it is not sufficient to keep your eye on the golf ball (unity) and "follow through" on your drive (coherence). You must "smack the pill" hard enough to make it go, and the force of the smack (emphasis) should be governed by the distance you wish the ball to cover.[10]

As we can see, reliance upon SAs had become pervasive in all sorts of instructional situations.

In the late thirties UCE began to break down in some texts into less general terms. It was obvious by this time to many teachers that UCE did not work well on every level of discourse, and some authors began to experiment with more specific SAs derived from UCE. John Kierzek's first Macmillan Handbook of 1939 allowed for Unity, Order, and Proportion on the theme level; Unity, Order, Arrangement, and Transitions on the paragraph level, and Clearness, Order, and Effectiveness on the sentence level. Donald Davidson's American Composition and Rhetoric in the same year broke UCE down completely into concrete discussions of how proportion can be achieved in writing, how to use transitions, etc. Other texts responded to the weakening of UCE by going the opposite way; instead of avoiding SA terms they piled them up with desperate abandon like sandbags on an eroding levee. Harry Shaw's Complete Course of 1940 was built around the terms Unity, Completeness, Clarity, Effectiveness, Order, Proportion, Length, and Transition. Obviously the radical simplification that had been the great appeal of Wendell's three terms was on the way out.

The 1940's brought more problems for UCE, as the General Education "communications" movement and the General Semantics movement became powerfully influential on composition courses. Most "communications" texts did not use SAs at all, since they were concerned with all four of the "communications skills"--listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Writing was, after all, only one-fourth of the purview of such courses, and "communications" texts had no dearth of material to cover without UCE. In addition, most "communications" texts reflected the beliefs of the Deweyite General Education movement; they were audience- and process- oriented rather than being concerned exclusively with the written product. General

Semantics texts were too much interested in words and their meanings to pay attention to prescriptive abstractions; abstraction, in fact, was one of the elements that GS distrusted in communication. Thus, the two great educational fads of the forties and early fifties, though they themselves did not last, helped to weaken many aspects of the older current-traditional rhetoric that preceded them.

After the 1940's, composition texts changed. Thesis texts came more and more to be the standard texts, and as a result textbook organization, which had once been ritually predictable, became experimental and arbitrary. Authors seemed to have given up on the "scientific" nature of composition; books after the late forties tended to be discursive, filled with many short subsections, process- and audience-oriented in novel ways. It was a period of change, and though the use of SAs remained widespread, their positions in the books that used them were no longer so central. Even traditional books like Brooks and Warren's Modern Rhetoric of 1950 (which was, of course, modern only by the standards of the twenties) and Richard Weaver's Composition of 1957 devoted only a few pages to UCE. Experimental texts used SAs even less.

The "Back to the Basics" movement of the mid-fifties, followed by the launching of Sputnik and the resulting "education race" with Russia put an end to the period of experimentation of 1945-55. But although the obvious experimentation ended and CTR again put its stress on "traditional," the damage to SAs had been done. After 1960, only a few textbooks would use SAs to organize whole chapters, and none would use them to organize whole books. Thesis texts typically devoted five or six pages to UCE and then went on; the terms were often found, but their power as a heuristic list was diminishing. Throughout the fifties and sixties, and even the early

seventies, SAs hung on in traditional textbooks. UCE was still the most popular formulation, but such old friends as Continuity, Movement, Variety, Effectiveness, and Economy were found as well. Through the great theoretical upheaval of the sixties SAs continued to be seen in texts, and it is only in the mid-seventies, when a crop of textbooks appeared that were informed by the "new rhetoric" of the sixties, that we can see the death-grip of SAs relax. Beginning around 1975, almost as if by agreement, new-textbook authors stopped using UCE and SAs in general. Even texts that were largely traditional did away with the old Wendell trinity and did not replace it with other SA terms. The possible reason for this sudden rejection of SAs we will examine in a moment.

Today SAs are found only in texts that have atrophied, like the older handbooks and McCrimmon's Writing with a Purpose. Newer texts have newer nostrums to offer--better systems with which to organize essays, more informed models of the writing process, more information on invention processes. Static abstractions as teaching tools seem to have come close to the end of their rope, and they hang on only contingently, soon to be sent to join sentence diagramming and the subset outline in whatever afterlife there may be for discredited current-traditional myths.

Epilogue: The Bloom and Blast of a Myth

Before I go on to discuss the problems that SAs present as a teaching method, let me make one point clear. I am not proposing that good writing does not have the qualities of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis. Of course it does. I hope this essay does. In addition, I hope it has the qualities of Clearness, Purity, Force, Beauty, Completeness, Effectiveness, Energy, Correctness, Smoothness, Dignity, Variety, Economy, Order, and Ease. Not to

mention, of course, Sincerity and Restraint. This sheer piling up of SAs begins to make my case against them; while no one would deny that all these fine terms are indeed desirable qualities in writing, they are devalued by their sheer numbers. These terms may indeed describe good writing, but they are useless, I will argue, in helping students create it.

The use of SAs in teaching writing, like so many aspects of CTR, became popular primarily because it appealed to teachers--not because it aided students. Casting about for something concrete to teach in a rhetoric course that was obviously cut off from traditional oratorical and belletristic concerns, the composition teachers of the late nineteenth century created to take their place a mythology: the modes of discourse, the methods of exposition, the organic paragraph, and static abstractions. These were the components, assembled over the course of approximately 25 years, of the "discourse theory" of current-traditional rhetoric. (I have here omitted many other important elements in early CTR, particularly the obsession with correct mechanics and usage and with pure diction, since these concerns are at or below the sentence level.) I call these theories mythology not because they are fantastic or absolutely untrue. They are myths because they were passed on unquestioningly by true believers, because their theoretical origins were lost and they atrophied into dogma, and because they grew to have a powerful symbolic value for those who believed in them. Without any clear idea of how to teach a contentless course, early composition teachers were forced to create content from their subjective perceptions of what was important in writing; thus necessity became the mother of the invention of "composition theory". Like other aspects of early current-traditional rhetoric, lists of SAs sounded complete, sounded helpfully descriptive of good writing, even sounded scientific to some.

They offered teachers a simple, easily taught, and seemingly enforceable heuristic, and for these reasons SAs throve for many years.

We do not, however, have to look very far to find problems with SAs as teaching tools. It was recognized as early as 1910 that the use of such abstract terms was not helpful to students. In Francis Berkeley's A College Course in Writing from Models, she attacked the use of SAs unequivocally:

> It is my firm belief that no student ever yet learned to write by means of studying rules and abstract principles from a text-book on rhetoric. After a fairly long experience with the endeavours of Freshmen and Sophomores, I feel absolutely sure that, to these long-suffering youngsters, "unity, mass, coherence," and all their works remain "miching mallecho" to the end of the chapter. Still another objection to this sort of teaching, besides its abstractness and consequent unintelligibility to the undergraduate mind, is that such teaching is mainly destructive.[11]

By "destructive," of course, Berkeley means that the UCE formula was used mainly to cast doubts on already written student work, to force students to constantly view their own work through the fun-house mirror of SA terms.

A more specific criticism of SAs was levelled by Henry Burrowes Lathrop in an article in Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature in 1918 and extended in the preface to his 1920 text Freshman Composition. Though Lathrop believed that Wendell's English Composition was "the beginning of a rational treatment of structure in English composition," he also complained that Wendell was "inaccurate in various ways":

> The first is the erection of three apparently coordinate principles of structure. There is one principle--unity; and to consider unity, coherence, and emphasis as things in any way independent tends to make students try, as one of mine put it, to "apply" them successively to their work. The result is a definite rigidity, a tendency to mechanism in style.[12]

Lathrop's complaint goes directly to the heart of the problem of using SAs in composition classes: students must try to "apply" them sequentially to work that they have already done, to make linear a process we know to be recursive. (It is for this reason that the use of SAs is one of the defining elements of the "product-orientation" of CTR.) This process of after-the-fact application of SAs has never been very helpful to students.

One of the main reasons for the failure of SAs to work well, as these early authors recognized, was the very abstractness of the terms. Such terms might create a neat descriptive list, but their generality made them useless as prescription. Such general terms live for highly educated people in a thick nutrient stew of examples, synonyms, antonyms, experiences, experiments, consideration. But unless SA-type terms are interinanimated by this sort of background knowledge they remain useless buzzwords. I.A. Richards was not directly addressing the question of SAs in his Philosophy of Rhetoric in 1936, but his thoughts on this question of interinanimation of terms are helpful. "The stability of the meaning of a word, "said Richards, "comes from the constancy of the contexts that give it its meaning."

> You will see, I hope, that these criteria--precision, vividness, expressiveness, clarity, beauty are representative instances of them--are misleading and unprofitable to study unless we use them with a due recognition of this interdependence among the words we use. . .and an alert distrust of our habit of taking words and their meanings for examination in isolation. The isolation is never complete, of course; a completely isolated word would be meaningless. The detachment we attempt is by means of a supposed standard setting, an imaginary schematic context which is assumed to be representative.[13]

When teachers look at such terms as "Coherence" or "Precision" in isolation, they may seem useful and even genuinely descriptive, but only because of the

informed "interdependence" that exists in our own minds. Students very seldom possess that informed context for such terms, and as a result, such abstract descriptors are indeed often "miching mallecho" (a wonderful term) to them.

The closest analogy we have for the pedagogical use of SAs on the level of discourse structure is the use of what Louis Milic has called "metaphysical descriptions" on the level of style. For most of history, says Milic, style study has languished under the same sort of general descriptive terms we have been discussing. As we saw during the breakdown of stylistic rhetoric during the nineteenth century, such terms as "clear," "pure," "precise," "energetic," have been used to describe individual styles or just "good" style with little attempt made to clarify the meaning of the terms.

"Stylistics," says Milic, "has for most scholars still no method beyond the method of impressionistic descriptions and a vague use of rhetoric. . . when all these descriptions are placed side by side, they amount to little more than a glossary of adjectives."[14] The relationship between the "metaphysical adjectives" about which Milic is complaining and the nouns which I have called static abstractions is fairly clear; both sorts of approaches try to make terms that are essentially personal appear to be objective. Milic's metaphysical terms are analogous to SAs also in that they refer not the activities of the writer but rather to the perceptions of the reader. "Though clear may seem to refer specifically to the writing process," says Milic, "it actually describes the response of the reader. What is clear to one may not be to another." Similarly, what is Emphatic to one may not be to another.

In critiquing metaphysical style criticism, Milic has also put his

finger on the weakness of SAs as elements of pedagogy: both metaphysical terms and static abstractions are essentially based in the subjective responses of the reader rather than being in the affective domain of the writer. Trying to keep terms like "effectiveness" and "variety" in mind while writing is simply not possible--or at least is not productive. Even the master SAs, Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis, are simply abstract terms that cannot be mechanically gridded over the complex process of writing. Real writers do not process their intentions through such abstract and isolated terms, as the protocol analyses of Linda Flower and John Hayes show.

Admitting that SAs cannot be useful as part of the composing process, what about their use in editing already completed drafts? Here again we encounter the problem of an informed sensibility and a context for such terms. Here also, I believe, we can find the reason why textbook SAs have almost completely disappeared in the last six or seven years.

As Lathrop suggested in 1920, the most common student use of SAs was as editorial terms; students were encouraged to "'apply' them successively to their work," checking their writing against the teacher's list of terms. That this process always had problems in practice there is little doubt, since it was condemned as early as 1910. But as long as students had any sort of informed context for SA terms like Unity and Coherence, their use was plausible, conceivable. They might not have worked well, but throughout most of this century they had <u>some</u> meaning for students, and their methodological problems could thus be ignored. So long as most students had read a few books and could vaguely grasp what Unity or Coherence looked like in practice, SAs were at least defensible.

After 1970, however, no teacher of composition could take for granted

that any of his or her students had read anything more complex than Jaws or "Peanuts." With open admissions, teachers were suddenly confronted with students for whom the term "coherence" was not merely a crude generalization but a complete mystery. If SAs were made minimally useful only by an informed context for their use, it is not surprising that without such knowledge, without that context of interinanimation, SAs became for students in the seventies mere words, with no recognizable meaning at all. How can a student be expected to recognize "proportion" or "clarity" in writing when his or her reading has been confined to high-school textbooks and TV Guide?

Thus, the use of SAs has declined in textbooks until today there are relatively few texts that use such terms in any important way. UCE do live on in certain more traditional (and usually older) books, but even the doughty trinity seems to be on the way out even there. After almost 90 years our discipline has finally grown beyond the facile use of "comparisons, analogies, and similarly crude approximations," as Milic puts it. We are at last coming to realize that all truly useful advice to students must be what Nancy Sommers calls "text-specific"; such convenient generalities as SAs just don't help students compose or edit their own work. It took a genuine literacy crisis to give the quietus to SAs, but now that we are seeing the myths of current-traditional rhetoric dissolve we can at last begin to work toward replacing them with effective methods. If static abstractions teach us anything, it is that we as teachers must always beware of neat, comprehensive-sounding conceptual schemes that are easy to teach but that have no real contact with what students need to learn.

NOTES

[1]Albert R. Kitzhaber, Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900 (Doctoral dissertation, Univ. of Washington, 1953), p. 221.

[2]Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres (Philadelphia: James Kay & Bro., 1844), p. 114.

[3]Erastus O. Haven, Rhetoric: A Text-Book (New York: Harper & Bros., 1869), p. vii.

[4]Alexander Bain, English Composition and Rhetoric (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), pp. 142-152.

[5]See, for instance, James De Mille, The Elements of Rhetoric (New York: Harper & Bros., 1878), Virginia Waddy, Elements of Rhetoric and Composition (New York: American Book Co., 1889), and William Williams, Composition and Rhetoric by Practice (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1890).

[6]Barrett Wendell, English Composition (New York: Scribners, 1891), pp. 28-29.

[7]The degree to which SAs had become part of the conceptual baggage of the composition course can seen in student annotations of textbooks from this period. Even in texts that use UCE very heavily, flyleaves and margin often show that students were expected to write them again and again. The list was obviously drummed into freshman heads. Even the process of seeking SA-type terms was encouraged. For instance, in a copy of Thomas Rankin's 1917 text The Method and Practice of Expositon in the Middleton Library at LSU, the student annotations tell a strange story. Rankin, a student of the iconoclastic Fred Newton Scott at Michigan, totally avoided SAs in this, his first textbook. And yet, on a page in the discursive section of the book in which Rankin describes the nature of exposition, the student owner of the

text has numbered and underlined every SA-type noun: "1. Truth, 2. clear, 3. interesting, 4. convincing, 5. controlled, 6. ethical." For that student (and for that teacher), SAs were the way in which good writing was conceptualized.

[8]Richard A. Lanham, Style: An Anti-Textbook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p.19.

[9]For more on the concept of thesis texts, see Robert J. Connors, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," CCC 33 (Dec. 1981), 451. It is ironic that Wendell, who originated the UCE trinity, was also the author of the first of the thesis texts that would eventually help to weaken his SA theory.

[10]William C. Hoffman and Roy Davis, Write and Speak Better (New York: Whittlesey House, 1937), pp. 21-23.

[11]Frances Campbell Berkeley, A College Course in Writing from Models (New York: Henry Holt, 1910.), p. ix.

[12]Henry Burrowes Lathrop, Freshman Composition (New York: Century Co., 1920), p. x.

[13]I.A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), pp. 70-71.

[14]Louis Tonko Milic, "Metaphysical Criticism of Style," in New Rhetorics, ed. Martin Steinmann (New York: Scribners, 1967), p. 164.